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**THE CRITICAL ROLE OF OFFICER COMMUNICATIONS IN THE  
21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY ARMY: A SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

**BY**

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# **Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies**

## ***The Critical Role of Officer Communications in the 21st Century Army: A Summary of Findings***

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**Military Fellow  
Research Report**

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## MAJOR THEMES

More than anything else, I had confidence in my soldiers, junior leaders, and staff. They were trained, and I knew they would carry the fight to the enemy. I trusted them, and they knew I trusted them. I think in Just Cause, which was a company commander's war, being a decentralized commander paid big dividends because I wasn't in the knickers of my company commanders all the time. I gave them the mission and let them do it. I couldn't do it for them.  
A Battalion Commander, Operation Just Cause Panama, 1989<sup>1</sup>

That statement by a battalion commander summarizes it best. Today's missions, from peacekeeping to preparing for war, are going to require more decentralized leadership.

As retired Lieutenant General Paul Blackwell has stated, "Leaders are finding themselves operating in environments that are increasingly more complex, faster-paced and more lethal than ever before."<sup>2</sup> Trusting our soldiers and leaders to execute their duties is paramount in today's Army.

Leaders must show confidence in their soldiers as well as trust that they will accomplish their mission. However, being told you are trusted and knowing you are trusted are two completely different things. Trust is built over time with hands-on leadership. One general officer I spoke to during this study believes that what we really need are "adaptive leaders"—that is, leaders who can recognize a situation, understand the commander's intent, and then execute the mission as required.

For the past several years there has been much discussion about the numbers of captains leaving the Army. Numerous reasons have been suggested and many surveys have been completed. It is my intent through this research to identify potential solutions that could address the concerns of captains and ensure that our junior officers continue to develop to a very high level.

The retention of captains is important for a variety of reasons. The grade of captain is where officers learn a majority of their skills. These are the years in an officer's career when company command takes place as well as key staff jobs. The Army makes a huge investment in captains, aimed at producing seasoned officers prepared to execute the responsibilities associated with being a field grade officer. Additionally, officers hold the grade of captain longer than any other rank. Normally a captain will spend eight years in grade, almost double what he or she will spend at any other rank. Finally, captains make up over 30 percent of the commissioned officer force (if lieutenants are counted, the number grows to over 57 percent).

Without being attentive to all the issues that are causing the attrition of captains, some of the programs the Army has put into place will not achieve the desired impact on retention. During the calendar year of this project, the Army has taken some positive steps for better retention, including higher pay, tracking the number of days deployed from home, and restricting the movement of soldiers who have children in high school. Yet, these alone will not address the issues of junior officers. If some attention is placed in the area of communication between senior leaders and those being led, many of the personnel challenges facing the Army will disappear.

*My main hypothesis in this research is that a lack of communication between junior officers (lieutenants and captains) and senior officers (lieutenant colonels and colonels primarily) contributes to officer attrition. By improving this communication we could educate junior officers so that the vast majority who leave the Army do so for reasons other than disgruntlement. Today that is not the case. Today's young officers are different from those now serving at the grade of lieutenant colonel and higher.*

In October 2000, Leonard Wong, a member of the Strategic Studies Institute at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, produced a monograph entitled *Generations Apart: Xers and Boomers in the Officer Corps*. Wong cited empirical evidence of generational differences, concluding that today's junior officers are of a different mindset than those who are Baby Boomers. (The Baby Boom Generation was born between 1943 and 1960 and the Generation X group was born between 1960 and 1980.<sup>3</sup>) Comparing both groups' outlooks on similar topics, he found that Xers want more balance between work and family and are not intimidated by rank. They are motivated by different stimuli. My own research focuses on the impact communication has between these two potentially different groups of officers.

My research shows that much of the disgruntlement among junior officers happens because they fail to see where they fit into the organization. They understand that they have a job to do, but somehow that job does not meet their expectations. They want to be fighters and prepare for combat, when in reality they are preparing for peacekeeping missions in Bosnia and Kosovo. In many cases they were in high school or the early stages of college when Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm were being conducted. That is the Army they were fired up to join. But the reality of today's Army is that it is much smaller and deployed on more missions than the Army of the early 1990s. Therefore,<sup>1</sup> they must realize that although the Army's missions have changed, its essence has not. Without addressing their concerns and recognizing their differences, their passion for the Army quickly dissolves and they move on to other careers.

Additionally, senior leaders have a responsibility to communicate their vision to junior officers. In effect, the junior officers' are the ones who will ensure that the commander's vision is executed. The small-group leaders' daily contact with soldiers is the avenue commanders should use to ensure that the unit stays on course. Lastly, communication regarding the junior officers performance is a must. An officer development program is useless without feedback. Commanders must provide face to face feedback to officers on areas that need improvement as well as those areas where the officer is excelling.

*My second hypothesis is that lack of communication inhibits the development of junior leaders.* Too many young officers list concerns that can be addressed at the battalion level. Many senior leaders are so focused on the execution of daily missions that the long-term development of junior leaders suffers. Senior leaders must become involved in developing young leaders to prepare them for company-level command and beyond. Too many officers don't have mentors, when in reality in every unit in every command, potential mentors are all around them. It is the responsibility of majors and lieutenant colonels to mentor their junior leaders.

One may well ask why senior leaders are too focused on the execution of day-to-day missions. "Juggling glass balls" is an old phrase that describes the problem—having to manage important missions that cannot be dropped. Today more than ever missions must be juggled, so a new analogy must be used. Today commanders are becoming known as "plate spinners." Clearly more plates can be spun than glass balls juggled. But the end state is the same: none can be dropped. And as more plates must be spun, some are going to receive less attention. Based on focus group discussions, it

seems officer development ends up being an area where less action is being taken. Without mentoring, counseling, and training, junior leaders fail to realize their potential. More importantly, they are ill prepared for the challenges ahead of them.

This has some second-order effects. As commanders question the abilities of their junior leaders, they get more involved. Many junior officers see this as micro-management. Micro-management not only stifles development, it limits the ability of the junior officer to impact the team with his individual skills. Senior leaders become very reluctant to allow young officers to execute hard, realistic training without supervision. But learning happens best when doing. Young officers executing tough missions on their own require the battalion commander to trust that they will execute those duties safely.

If this risk is taken and junior leaders are allowed to train their teams, their development will flourish. Combine this with a hands-on approach to their training and the passion for service will return. The mission the Army is executing may not change, but the junior officers' understanding of that mission and their own personal development will go a long way toward making them viable leaders in the Army of the 21st century.

### **Communication Defined**

As noted in the Army's *Field Manual 22-100*, communicating well involves displaying good oral, written, and listening skills with both individuals and groups. Speaking and listening skills are essential to any two-way communication. As an illustration, consider the following experience described in Field Manual 22-100



concerning a visit by a battalion commander to K Company, 333rd Infantry Regiment, 84th Division, in January 1945, during the coldest winter in Europe in nearly 50 years:

On a front-line visit, the battalion commander criticized 1LT Leinbaugh and CPT Jay Prophet, the A Company Commander, for their own and their men's appearance. He said it looked like no one had shaved for a week. 1LT Leinbaugh replied that there was no hot water. Sensing a teaching moment, the colonel responded: "Now if you men would save some of your morning coffee it could be used for shaving." Stepping over to a snowbank, 1LT Leinbaugh picked up a five-gallon GI [general issue] coffee can brought up that morning, and shook it in the colonel's face. The frozen coffee produced a thunk. 1LT Leinbaugh shook it again. "That's enough," said the colonel, "... I can hear."<sup>4</sup>

This example illustrates three points associated with communications. First, it shows the importance of a leader going to where the action is to see and feel what's really going on. Second, it shows the importance of a first-line leader telling the boss something he doesn't want to hear. And finally, it shows the importance of a leader accepting information that doesn't fit his preconceived notions. These are the communication tools needed to ensure that we are preparing our leaders for the missions we expect them to execute.

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

In order to test my hypotheses, I conducted interviews and held focus group discussions. In addition, I conducted separate interviews with seven general officers to gain their perspective on the challenges associated with captain attrition. These interviews also focused on how times have changed since they served as company

grade officers. Did they perceive the current attrition as a new problem, or did they see the numbers as indicative of what they had experienced throughout their careers?

Interviews were also conducted with members of key directorates in the United States Army Total Personnel Command (PERSCOM). These interviews focused primarily on the promotion system and the Officer Evaluation Reporting System (OERS). Additional interviews were conducted with staff members from the Center for Strategic and International Studies as well as the Army Research Institute. In both cases, I was able to use information from studies these civilian-run agencies had completed during previous years. Because of the importance of this topic, many such surveys have already been done. I made use of those findings during this research project.

Five separate focus groups were used. The largest involved Army captains with four to six years of active federal service. These officers not only participated in focus group discussions but also completed surveys that provided complete anonymity. Two separate focus groups involved captains. They formed the largest focus group because their concerns represent the crux of the challenges the Army needs to address. Majors, lieutenants, and serving battalion commanders completed the focus group participants. Majors were questioned on their role in junior officer mentoring as well as the perceived challenges of branch qualifying positions. These field grade officers were also asked about their perceptions of key decisions being made concerning the Army's direction as well as the existence of a problem with communication at the company grade level.

The lieutenants, who had from zero to two years of service, were in a focus group discussions that examined the expectations at their first units. They were asked

what role they saw themselves filling and what responsibility the unit had in their own development. Finally, battalion commanders were formed as a focus group to gain their insights into command and their role in lieutenant and captain development. In each of these focus groups, the numbers varied from a low of five to approximately 100. Captains were broken up into smaller subsets to encourage more feedback and less intimidation among peers. All in all, each of the focus groups contributed to the insight necessary to get at the root of the problem.

Approximately 120 surveys were completed. The nature of the survey required open-ended questions. The thought was to provide officers with a way to expound on their beliefs, feelings, and perceptions. This proved very beneficial, because many officers offered solutions to the problems they listed. This is a trait we want all of our officers to possess. Identifying a problem is nice, but finding a fix to that problem is what will enhance the performance of soldiers and units.

## **FINDINGS**

Six major findings emerged from the research.

### **1. Captains are getting out of the military because they are frustrated with the senior leadership in the organization.**

Table 1.1 summarizes the percentages for answers given to an open-ended question in the company grade officer survey.

In table 1, the responses in boldface indicate answers in areas that the battalion commander can directly influence. More than half the responses (56%) fell under this category. This ties directly into both of the hypotheses identified earlier. Senior leaders must communicate with younger leaders in order to learn what their expectations and

goals are and how those personal goals relate to those of the unit. The chain of command can then help develop those young officers to achieve not only their personal goals but also the goals of the unit.

Lack of communication with junior officers results in those officers' trying to figure out a direction for their career without guidance, leadership, or mentoring. Combine that with a robust economy, and officers who believe they are not going to be challenged and led will feel they may as well go elsewhere and earn more money. Of the officers surveyed, 12.5 percent listed better opportunities outside the Army as a reason for leaving.

<b>Table 1.1 "If you have chosen to leave the Army, what are the top three reasons?"</b>	
Family	18.7%
Command climate	16.6%
Unable to attain personal goals	14.6%
Better job opportunities outside the Army	12.5%
Unpredictability	10.4%
Money	6.2%
Lack of training time	6.2%
Organization stagnant	4.2%
Unethical political leadership	4.2%
Negative outlook as field grade officer	2.1%
Too many missions	2.1%
Plan from the beginning	2.1%
Total respondents	99

## **2. Family must be considered in any decision affecting the officer.**

Currently, the Army has no formal program that communicates with the spouse. Commanders cannot control or necessarily influence the spouse or the personal decisions that affect the soldier and his family, but they must be attuned to the

challenges families face. That said, the commander must look for ways he can address family concerns and challenges. By doing so, the commander shows the spouse he acknowledges the challenges associated with Army life.

"Family" was included as a response choice because although battalion commanders can influence the involvement of the family, in reality he has little control of the decisions that affect the spouse as such. When company grade officers (who were mostly males in this survey) were asked what was their wife's biggest frustration with the Army, 50.8 percent stated areas that again focused on the battalion commander and his command climate. Table 2.1 shows the responses.

It is nothing new to the Army that the vast majority of our force is married. The Army, which to some extent has paid lip service to taking care of the family, is now realizing that a soldier's family is as important as his or her career and must be addressed. The response "time separated" would include frustration over long duty hours. For the most part, long hours will not change significantly for units whose OPTEMPO is high. Nevertheless, commanders can influence this somewhat by ensuring that when soldiers are in garrison the training schedules and work priorities are designed so soldiers can optimize their time at home.

We have so many deployments today that we need to truly take advantage of the limited time we spend at home station. Working long hours to meet mission requirements is sometimes necessary, but that pace should not be maintained. A successful unit cannot continually run at the highest level for extended periods of time. Something will give, and more often than not what gives is the family.

<b>Table 2.1. "Are you married? If so, what is your wife's biggest frustration with the Army?"</b>	
<b>Lack of stability/unpredictability</b>	<b>22.0%</b>
<b>Time separated</b>	<b>20.3%</b>
Medical system	10.2%
Not married/divorced	13.5%
PERSCOM feedback	8.5%
<b>The way she is treated</b>	<b>8.5%</b>
Money	6.8%
Other (includes moving claims, unit location, etc.)	5.1%
Spouse employment	3.4%
None	1.7%
<i>Total of respondents</i>	<b>59</b>

### 3. Field grade officers are key to the development of junior officers.

If we consider battalion commanders as part of the field grade pool, we find that 51.5 percent of the officers considered a field grade officer as their mentor.

If captains don't aspire to be as their field grade officers are (see table 3.2 below), then the pool of those who would be appropriate mentors has shrunk significantly.

With almost half of the captains (47 percent) not aspiring to be like their majors (field grade officers), we must take a look at the role model these young officers are expected to emulate. We must first look at field grade officers before we can try to identify why captains feel the way they do.

The perception among majors (who had from 10 to 13 years of service) was that the Army was not telling the whole truth as it relates to promotion opportunities, career field designation (CFD), and the new Officer Evaluation Report (OER). If the belief among majors is that an integrity problem exists, it would be easy for a junior officer, with less than three years of service, to have serious doubts about the Army.

If we are to get at the crux of what is affecting our company grade officers, we should also ensure that we have addressed the challenges faced by those officers who provide the mentoring. Field grade officers typically spend 12 months in the jobs where they can have the biggest impact on company grade officers. That is also the period when the major is likely to be completing his branch qualifying time. Because of the huge responsibility to do well during this battalion command preparation period, little time is left for mentoring. Although the Officer Personnel Management System XXI (OPMS XXI) is designed to give warfighters opportunities to spend more time in branch qualifying jobs, that has not yet come to fruition.

The result is that majors spend the entire 12 months completely dedicated to executing the missions of the battalion commander. Focus group discussions with captains show that one result of this dynamic is that captains come to view majors as self-serving. True or not, that perception persists and a result is that very few captains see them as role models they can go to for development or career decisions. Battalion commanders must recognize these dynamics and ensure that they have empowered their field grade officers to make decisions, develop junior officers, and balance work with family. Without this balance we, will not enhance the communication necessary between the field grade and company grade officers.

<b>Table 3.1 "Who (by position) do you see as your mentor?"</b>	
<b>Battalion commander</b>	<b>23.4%</b>
No one	17.7%
<b>Battalion S3</b>	<b>14.6%</b>
Company commander	14.6%
<b>Battalion XO</b>	<b>13.5%</b>
Immediate supervisor	9.3%
First sergeant	2.1%
Command sergeant major	2.1%
Brigade commander	2.1%
<b>Total respondents</b>	<b>96</b>

<b>Table 3.2 "Do you aspire to be as your field grade officers?"</b>	
<b>NO</b>	<b>47%</b>
<b>YES</b>	<b>36%</b>
50/50	17%
<b>Total respondents</b>	<b>66</b>

**4. The expectations of junior officers can be met within the framework of a battalion-sized organization.**

The survey results on this topic are clearly within the parameters of a battalion-sized unit. To resolve the concerns raised, support will be needed from the brigade and divisional leadership, but only a shift in priority may be required. This finding is a subset of the second hypothesis, which focuses on communication and the development of good leaders. If the premise that a junior leader's goals are achievable is sound, then why aren't these goals being achieved? Better communication to those officers again surfaces as a need.

Table 4.1 shows what junior officers most expected from their senior leaders. For each of the response categories, the commander controls the perceptions. In most



cases, he sets the climate for the unit as well as setting the example. The way leaders balance their time in the office versus a training area, or at work instead of at home, will send a strong signal to those around them.

Battalion commanders will need help from their higher commanders in the two areas in bold print in table 4.1. Battalion commanders must be confident that the priorities they establish will be in line with the direction their bosses want to go. Two-way communication between each battalion commander and his boss is as critical as the communication required within the battalion. The battalion commander must convince his rater and senior rater that the training environment he has established will bring about safe and effective training, while optimizing the development of his junior leaders.

<b>Table 4.1 "What do you expect from your senior leaders?" Percentages of responses given</b>	
Honesty in word and deed	18.3%
Mentorship	18.3%
Leadership	11.7%
<b>Realistic priorities</b>	<b>11.7%</b>
Support/defend subordinates	9.2%
<b>Allow subordinates to take risks</b>	<b>6.6%</b>
Show dignity and respect to subordinates	5.0%
Be technically competent	5.0%
Balance work and family life	4.2%
Loyalty	3.3%
Compassion/encouragement	3.3%
Work smarter	3.3%
<b>Total respondents</b>	<b>120</b>

**5. The new Officer Evaluation Report (OER) is not a contributor to captain attrition.**

Since the OER is one of the primary tools used for selection for promotion or schooling, any changes to it can be unnerving for the officer. By 1997, the OER had become relatively useless due to inflated reports. It was reworked, and the new OER was put into effect by the end of that year with a changed marking system that would result in potentially lower marks for many officers. An effective communication program was needed to quell a potentially controversial issue. During the focus group discussions with captains and majors for this research, no concern was expressed about the new OER. Officers understood the rules associated with Above Center of Mass (ACOM) and Center of Mass (COM) reports. Likewise, from more than 100 survey respondents, not one listed the OER as a reason why captains are getting out of the Army. This episode suggests that effective communication with officers can result in a positive outcome.

The success associated with the new OER can be attributed to the program established by the US Army Personnel Command (PERSCOM), which listed the rules for how the new OER would be implemented. That said, it is still an area that cannot be overlooked. If commanders fail to continue an open dialogue on their rating philosophy on OERs, the OER could become a contributor.

Officers who have less than five years of service are still waiting to see if what they were told about promotion rates is going to prove true. The new OER restricts senior raters to only 49 percent of officers to be rated in the top block. The old system had become so inflated that if you received any rating other than a top block you were

at risk for promotion to the next rank. This fact was one of the key points PERSCOM stressed in its information. Officers who would receive less than an Above Center of Mass (ACOM) would still be competitive for schooling and promotions. The change was that many officers who had received nothing but top block ratings were now going to receive something less. PERSCOM needed to ensure officers that although they were receiving less than a top block they would still be able to advance.

PERSCOM is doing a good job providing the results of recent boards to show the number of officers being promoted with COM reports.<sup>5</sup> Table 5.1 provides the breakdown of promotions from the boards held in FY 2000. This is a good-news story. It shows that without a doubt, officers are being promoted with COM reports. The question is, will those same officers being promoted also be selected for advanced schooling and command positions? The proof for these officers is still several years away. Predicting the future is not going to help narrow our differences, but with an honest dialogue, supported by an evaluation system that rewards performance, we can start to regain the confidence of our young leaders.

Explanations that compare a Center of Mass file with a Center of Mass report are crucial. We will all receive COM reports during our careers, but a pattern of COM reports can place an officer at risk because his file then becomes a COM file. Officers with COM files tend to not be selected for advanced schooling and could also be at risk for promotion to the next higher grade. This should not be alarming to officers, but should alert them to the very real possibility that a Center of Mass file might prevent them from being selected to the rank of major or above. Given today's shortages, promotion to captain is almost automatic for those officers who display a professional

work ethic and desire to improve. And with the continued shortage of captains, promotion rates to major and lieutenant colonel continue to rise (see Table 5.2 below). Sitting down with the group of officers by grade/position and starting a dialogue will go a long way in dispelling rumors as well as ensuring that all understand the commanders' rating philosophy.

A more realistic picture is shown in Table 5.3, which only includes those officers who were first-time considered and selected in the primary zone. Title 10 law requires the formula used in Table 5.2 for computing percentages when including BZ and AZ officers. But the majority of officers are selected in the primary zone, so Table 5.3 offers a slightly different but more useful perspective.

There does not appear to be a direct correlation between the officers who are getting out and the number of COM reports they receive. Moreover, there are officers whose reports have all been Above Center of Mass (ACOM) in company-level command who have chosen to leave the Army, which further echoes that OER is not the reason for attrition.

The OER is a symptom of a larger problem facing the Army. Captains I spoke with were not fazed by the fact that they had received COM reports. They understand the math, but in some cases they didn't believe they were being measured on their performance. By design, officers are being told much earlier in their careers where they stand. In some cases, captains aren't sticking around to see if they will make the cut for schooling and promotion. They are taking advantage of the opportunities in the civilian sector and voting with their feet.

Table 5.1

<b>CPT Board recessed 17 March 2000</b>	3,043 selected with the new OER Support Form (AR 67-9) 87.7% of selects had at least one COM report 1% had no new OER 1,784 selects had two or more COM report
<b>MAJOR Board recessed 15 May 2000</b>	1,650 selected with AR 67-9 66% of selects had at least one COM reports Branch qualifying positions – 41% selects had at least one COM 3.9% had no new OER 466 selects had two or more COM reports 9 Selects had 4 COM reports 1 Select had 5 COM reports
<b>LTC Board, recessed 24 March 2000</b>	1,273 selected with new OER AR 67-9 63% of selects had at least one COM BQ Position – 53% selects had at least one COM report 1.1% had no new OER 329 selects had two or more COM reports 14 of selects had 4 COM reports 2 selects had 5 COM reports
<b>COLONEL Board, recessed 16 August 2000</b>	410 selected with new OER AR 67-9 65% of selects had at least one COM report 0.2% had no new OER 138 selects had two or more COM reports 6 selects had 4 COM reports 2 selects had 5 COM reports

<b>Table 5.2 PROMOTION RATES</b>				
	<b>FY97</b>	<b>FY98</b>	<b>FY99</b>	<b>FY00</b>
<b>LTC</b>	65.6%	75.3%	76.4%	82.3%
<b>MAJ</b>	80.7%	85.0%	87.1%	92.3%

Percentages are based on the total number eligible (first time considered) divided by the total number selected (above the zone, AZ; primary zone, PZ; and below the zone, BZ)

Table 5-3 PROMOTION RATES				
	FY97	FY98	FY99	FY00
<b>LTC</b>	59.9%	67.8%	68.8%	71.7%
<b>MAJ</b>	74.2%	77.0%	78.1%	79.6%

Percentages are based on the total number eligible (first-time considered) divided by the total number selected in the primary zone only.

## 6. Lack of communication breeds lack of trust.

The hypotheses for this study were that lack of communication affects both officer attrition and officer development. For example, a junior officer develops a lack of trust in the senior leadership when decisions are made that he doesn't understand. With no communication or background information from the senior leadership, the junior officer begins to formulate his own opinion based on perceptions. Unchecked perceptions may lead to deepening distrust. By contrast, feedback to and from the chain of command on the rationale behind key decisions will not only help to answer some of the unanswered questions but also give the junior officer a method for voicing his perceptions.

There is also a flip side to trust. If the junior officer is not confident in what mistakes will be allowed by the chain of command, he begins to develop a zero-defect mentality. As General (retired) Dennis Reimer has stated, "As competition in the now trimmer Army became keener, a stifling atmosphere of perfection known as the 'zero defects mentality', along with notions of careerism, emerged."<sup>6</sup> The Army does seem to have developed that mentality in some cases. Officers without communication with their chain of command develop a belief that any mistake made will result in adverse comments on their next OER. Zero-defects, micro-management, and lack of trust all

are the result of faulty or nonexistent communication. Without the belief that their senior leadership is behind them, junior leaders are not going to execute tasks without approval. This limits their development because they will only execute tasks they know are in "safe" territory.

As Table 6.1 shows, a plurality of respondents (34.5%) thought that "zero defects" did not exist in their unit. That is good, but conversely, over 65 percent of officers felt it did exist. That is too large a number if we want officers to develop skills to be able to operate in a more decentralized manner. The areas in bold print account for 51.7 percent of responses. These are areas of expectation that, if not communicated to officers effectively, leave them with the perception that committing such errors would be career ending. Surely safety violations that result in the loss of life or limb are going to have a different career impact than a vehicle accident during a training event. But key leaders must be aware that without communication officers will react to how the commander handles each mistake.

Senior leaders should focus most of their attention on what happens after a mistake is made and not on the actual mistake. Seeing how a junior officer reacts to a mistake made will tell a lot about how he would react in a situation where he is required to make decisions. This can be a powerful tool in developing junior leaders.

<b>Table 6.1 "Define zero-defects as it relates to your last leadership position. Are there known inexcusable mistakes?"</b>	
<b>Safety violations</b>	<b>11.5%</b>
<b>Integrity violations</b>	<b>18.4%</b>
Alcohol/drug related incidents	11.5%
Appearance of prejudice	2.0%
<b>Making mistakes</b>	<b>9.2%</b>
<b>Failure to meet standards</b>	<b>12.6%</b>
"Zero defects" did not exist	34.5%
<b>Total respondents</b>	<b>87</b>

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Professional Development of Officers**

The senior rater has overall responsibility for the professional development of junior officers in his/her rating chain. As such the senior rater's role is key to the success of the Junior Officer Development Support Form program. He/she must create and sustain a command climate that fosters active and open communication. Army Regulation 623-105<sup>7</sup>

This is the first of our skills that must be improved among junior and senior leaders. Improvement must start with our general officers. If there is to be a major shift in our strategy or direction, then it must be presented in the old-fashioned way, through the chain of command. For example, as General Shinseki (Chief of Staff US Army, CSA) changes the focus of our Army to transform it into a more mobile, lighter force, he should also equally stress how we will transform our leaders. This process starts at four-star conferences and ends with battalion commanders. Commanders at all levels begin to cross-talk on key decisions that are affecting their unit. Once that information



reaches the lower level, commanders are empowered to execute with very little oversight.

One of the strong traits of our military is its structure. There is a clear chain of command, and when the commander makes a decision it is to be carried out, not discussed. But to ensure that the team is on-board with the direction of the boss, a dialogue among commanders makes this process more productive.

At the battalion level, communication should start within 48 hours of the new officer arriving. A family readiness group representative should greet the new officer's family within its first week. Once in the unit, the officer should be required to accomplish certain tasks and provide feedback to the battalion commander within 90 days. A follow-on meeting will serve to validate the officer's in-processing, as well as give the battalion commander some feedback from "fresh eyes." This process starts to ingrain in the officer the importance of knowing about his unit. Additionally, it gives the battalion commander an opportunity to know the officer as well as start to formulate what path would work best to make this officer successful.

Some program should also be established for commanders to meet the new spouse. Through this program, the spouse can see the important role she (or he) has in joining the team. This up-front cost will go a long way toward making both of their experiences with the Army and this unit positive.

The command climate in an organization where the soldiers are a part of the decision cycle and have a vested interest in the direction of the unit tends to be very good. Getting feedback from the subordinate chain of command is going to show the

commander where his attention needs to be placed and result in a more balanced approach to mission accomplishment.

This recommendation does not presume that welcome programs don't exist. No doubt they exist, but tweaking them to ensure the individuals' goals are addressed will make them better. Periodic counseling sessions with key groups in the unit will also serve to make the unit more cohesive.

### **Getting Feedback to the Force**

During my interviews with the Center for Army Leadership at Fort Leavenworth, I was told about a survey conducted among field grade officers attending the Command and General Staff College. In that survey, the officers answered tough questions about where the Army is and the direction it is going. To date, the results of that survey have not been released. If the results are not released, it becomes indicative of secrecy and shows a lack of communication that has already been shown as a major problem. Several methods could be used, but releasing the results to commanders in the field would probably be most productive. Commanders could communicate the results of the survey and what the Army is doing to address the concerns presented. Additionally, the pre-command course or a similar venue for commanders could be used to address the issues of field grade officers. It should be left to commanders in the field to develop plans to fix those areas under their charge. Once these are addressed, majors should learn the role they are to play in mentoring junior officers.

## **Educating Leaders**

Another program at Fort Leavenworth that should be given serious consideration Army-wide is the 360 Leadership Feedback Program. This program has run several pilot tests, beginning in FY 97/98 with the Combined Arms Services Staff School (CAS3) and culminating in FY 00 in two separate Forces Command (FORSCOM) brigades. The data gathered from these pilot tests show the value in executing the program. The most important effect of this program is that it educates the force about what is expected of leaders. The pilot test that showed some of the benefits of the 360 program are:

### **For the individual:**

- Increases performance feedback to the leader
- Increases motivation to improve behavior
- Increases leader communication with subordinates, peers, and superiors
- Improves coaching with action plan development and execution.

### **For the Army:**

- Leadership improvement increases unit performance
- Educates the force on Values, Attributes, Skills, and Actions
- Communicates to "others" that the organization values their input
- Reinforces respect and consideration of others.<sup>8</sup>

COL Lynch (Commander, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Fort Hood, Texas) who participated in one of the pilot tests, stated: "Receiving feedback from subordinates, peers, and superiors proved to be very useful. During the counseling session the counselor worked with the officer to develop an action plan to improve his leadership skills. Very useful."

As with any new program, there are costs. In this case it is believed that approximately \$2 million will be needed initially to get the program started. Then

somewhere between \$1.15 and \$2 million will be needed to sustain the program. These costs are high, but the benefits of this program far exceed the costs.

The implementation of this program would fix many of the problems associated with the shortfalls we currently have in our communication. Additionally, as missions become more complex and more decentralization is needed, this program could be used to verify that junior leaders are getting the message.

### **Communicating Philosophies**

Commanders communicate their philosophies and priorities verbally as well as in the written form. Many commanders have a command philosophy that is published and hangs on their unit bulletin boards. This philosophy must be stressed often so that subordinates understand the direction the unit is headed. Verbal reinforcement will also serve as a valuable tool at briefings welcoming new soldiers to the unit. The more a commander can promote his vision, the more effectively the unit can meet the goals established.

Commanders should also make their OER rating philosophy known to all officers. They should ensure that it is a part of in-briefings with new officers and that it is reiterated during periodic counseling sessions. PERSCOM should continue to publish the results of promotion and school selection boards, regardless of what the numbers show. This is a good-news story for the Army and should continue on its current course.

## **Improving Counseling**

The theme throughout this paper has been the need to improve communication. Some of that improvement can come in the form of counseling. Although counseling involves communication, counseling has a distinct purpose and direction. Through counseling, leaders can correct behavior, teach, and mentor. This process allows the rater or senior rater to address specific topics that the rated officer can work on. Additionally, counseling can be done prior to training events, so that the officer is set up for success and not failure. This would allow leaders to discuss their outlook on mistakes and what is expected. Too many leaders are not focused on training their officers, believing the officers should come in with the necessary skills. But this is not the case in most units. Officers need to be trained, taught, mentored, and coached on how to optimize their abilities. This responsibility clearly falls on the shoulders of the chain of command.

We must expand on the ability of senior leaders to coach and teach junior officers so they are prepared to execute hard, realistic training. To utilize some of today's automated features, there is a web site at [www.counseling.army.mil](http://www.counseling.army.mil) that lists techniques and topics for counseling at every level. This tool is a great help to leaders in developing a framework for counseling. It also lists topic discussion points that can be used to get counseling sessions going. Maybe leaders shouldn't need these, but based on interviews and my experience, shortcomings still exist with counseling. This web site is one that should be visited frequently to help leaders determine methods to get in touch with their teams. It can serve to correct behavior in some cases and in

others simply give a starting point for communication. There is sometimes the belief that any counseling must or should be designed to correct a fault. Many times the most effective counseling happens when the senior leader does not intend on counseling. More times than not, it will be in a less formal setting or on a topic not specific to the day's duties.

The front side of the OER can also serve as an invaluable tool for counseling.<sup>9</sup> Part IV, "Performance Evaluation—Professionalism" is an excellent tool that can be used to talk about an officer's strengths and areas where he or she needs improvements. This portion of the OER covers Army values, as well as the leader's desired attributes, skills, and actions. By using this tool, the senior rater can give the rated officer some specific feedback.

Another tool that PERSCOM is currently working on is a discussion board on the captain's home page. This program is designed to give captains a way to discuss their concerns. This site is still under development, but it could prove to be a valuable tool for senior leaders and commanders at all levels to identify potential trouble spots that may need attention.

## **CONCLUSION**

Leaders at all levels need to actively pursue the training of those under their charge. Two-way communication must be established to encourage feedback and understanding at the lower levels. Company-level commanders must be given the opportunity to take risks, make mistakes, and all along know that they are supported by their superiors.

We must take a look at new opportunities for ensuring that lieutenants gain more time in lieutenant jobs. For example, some risk should be taken at the battalion staff level to allow lieutenants more time in company leadership positions developing their leadership skills. The non-commissioned officers (NCO) should be allowed to execute the tasks that the lieutenant was going to execute as a staff member. In virtually every case, the NCO has far more experience in the job than the lieutenant, and if the NCO is empowered to execute the tasks necessary, he or she will be successful.

Additionally, we must ensure that young officers understand their role in communication. Two-way communication means junior officers must also take an active role in their development. They must come prepared to discuss their shortcomings as well as areas where they feel they are on track. The leadership of the battalion can work together to turn weaknesses into strengths. The Army should also look closely at ways to incorporate communication training into the curriculum of each level of education for officers. The officer basic course should include discussions that center on the Junior Officer Development Support Form (JODSF). This training should show lieutenants what to expect in their initial counseling as well as where they should focus their JODSF. Captains should be taught at the Captain's Career Course (CCC) on how to effectively counsel lieutenants using the JODSF. Additional training should involve hands-on training with their Small Group Leader on actual counseling scenarios. The Command and General Staff College (CGSC) should be the last level of formal training for officers. At this level, majors can be taught techniques to use that will prepare them for their role as senior members of a battalion or brigade staff.

Incoming battalion and brigade commanders should be taught effective counseling techniques during their Pre-Command course at Fort Leavenworth. The Center for Army Leadership serves as the melting pot for all the Army trends in leadership and would be the best conduit to discuss ways to enhance a unit's performance through counseling. This asset should be used to its fullest by incorporating the lessons learned into the Pre-Command Course curriculum. Additionally, the small-group atmosphere of this course allows future commanders to discuss personal experiences from their careers that may prove insightful to others.

I am confident in our Army and the direction it is heading. To ensure that we are truly developing the leaders of the future, we need to invest more time in their lieutenant years. This investment will build confidence in them and in the senior leaders they are assigned to follow.

Winston Churchill once said, "It is no use saying, 'we are doing our best'. You have got to succeed in doing what is necessary." The Army has done what is necessary since its very beginning; we must now do what is necessary to reestablish confidence in our junior leaders.



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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Army, *Field Manual No. 22-100* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Combined Arts Center & U.S. Army Center for Army Leadership, 31 August 1999), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> LTC Paul E. Blackwell and LTC Gregory J. Bozek, *Leadership in the New Millennium* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1981), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Wong, *Generations Apart: Xers and Boomers in the Officer Corps* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, October 2000).

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Army, *Field Manual No. 22-100*, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> From "PERSCOM On-Line, Officer Evaluation Reporting System (OERS), OPMS XXI, Spring 2000," accessed in March 2001 at <http://www-perscom.army.mil/tagd/oers/oerpage.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Wong, *Generations Apart*, p.2. Also see General Dennis Reimer, "Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Empowerment, Environment and the Golden Rule," *Military Review*, Vol. 76 (January-February 1996), pp.5-9.

<sup>7</sup> Army Regulation 623-105, para 3-14.

<sup>8</sup> LTC Rick Fayan, "360 Leadership Feedback Program," transcript of a conference presentation made April 14, 2000. Fayan is Chief of the Leadership Research and Assessment Division (LRAD), Center for Army Leadership, Fort Leavenworth, KS.

<sup>9</sup> Army Regulation 623-105, para 3-14.

